

PETER WISE

Springfield Criminal Defense Lawyer is a True Believer in Clients and Criminal Law

by Bethany Krajelis

SPRINGFIELD—If you ask D. Peter Wise about one of his cases, it won't take him more than few seconds to recite all of its details.

Whether he tried the case more than two decades ago or is in the middle of discovery, Wise, a founding partner of the Springfield law firm of **Gates, Wise & Schlosser, P.C.**, often starts the story of the many criminal cases he has handled the same way: with his client's name.

"I can't remember names, but he can recount details of trials he had when he was 25. It's

convinced of their innocence to the bitter end."

For instance, when Wise took on a 14-year-old client charged with killing his grandparents a couple of years ago, Gates says his law partner didn't hesitate to say he would let the teen babysit his children any day.

"I remember being like, 'Really?' But that's how he is," Gates says. "He believes them until he's proved otherwise. He's a true believer and that, to me, is the best way I can define Peter. He believes his clients and is a true believer in the criminal justice system."

underdog, but that's certainly part of it," Wise says. "There's truly a challenge to practicing criminal law, and it's hard to even articulate. There's an 'us-against-them' part to this, too, but the bottom line is I like being an advocate."

And believing his clients is an important aspect to being an effective advocate, Wise says.

"You have to show the jurors you're prepared, you have a passion for the case, and that you like your client," he says. "A jury isn't going to acquit a defendant if their lawyer is keeping a



bizarre," says Wise's law partner, Gordon W. Gates. "When they are his clients, they become part of his life. He remembers them my name, not by what they are charged with."

It's not just Wise's knack for remembering his clients' names that makes him a great lawyer, though. As someone who doesn't handle criminal cases, Gates says it took him by surprise to see how zealously Wise represents people who many lawyers would assume are guilty or at least have some concerns about.

"Peter is utterly blind to that," Gates says. "I don't care what they've been accused of; he is

Being an Advocate

For Wise, a 51-year-old Springfield native who has two sons with his wife, Cheryl, believing clients is just part of the job of a criminal defense attorney.

After all, he says, "They don't come to me for judgment. They come to me for advocacy."

While it can be tough to represent defendants who are facing their fate in court, being able to serve as an advocate is what makes him step over that "Come Back With Warrant" doormat everyday to enter his office.

"It might be a little bit cliché to say I like what I do because I'm representing the

distance from them. If a juror somehow sees that the defendant's lawyer doesn't like them or is somehow distancing themselves from them, that's not good."

Fortunately for his clients, Wise doesn't distance himself from them. Or at least that's what his trial record would suggest.

In his more than two-decade long career as a criminal defense attorney, Wise has convinced several central Illinois juries to acquit a number of his clients who have faced charges on everything from misdemeanors to murder.

Wise is able to build relationships with his clients by doing something he considers to be

pretty simple, but something he believes some attorneys often overlook.

"I listen. I listen. I listen," he says. "I see so many situations where lawyers have this preconceived notion of what the facts are and they don't listen to their clients. I listen, and it's amazing how much you can learn when you listen."

Wise also works hard to make his clients, as well as jurors and witnesses, feel comfortable, even if that means having to go to their houses or a local tavern.

Several years ago, Wise represented a man charged with sexual assault. He knew all of the witnesses were regular patrons of a little tavern on Springfield's north side, so he went there one night, bellied up to the bar, ordered a few beers, and conducted some interviews.

His dedication and ability to relate to clients is why George F. Taseff, senior litigator for the Federal Public Defender for the Central District of Illinois, says Wise tops his list of attorneys who he recommends to those in need of representation.

Taseff has known Wise for nearly three decades through their involvement in national and state criminal defense groups. Wise is a past president of the state affiliate of the National Association of Criminal Defense Lawyers.

"He has a great rapport with his clients," Taseff says. "I always know he is going to work hard and will provide the very best defense. He's a real pro and a model for younger attorneys."

Finding His Own Style

It didn't take long after his childhood dream of becoming a professional baseball player faded for Wise to realize he wanted to be an attorney.

Wise, the son of a dermatologist and homemaker who took care of him and his six siblings, says the Watergate scandal and his ability to talk his way out of trouble as a teenager led him to the legal profession.

After he graduated from Tulane University with an English degree in 1981, Wise moved to Chicago to attend The John Marshall Law School. While he learned a lot in law school, Wise says a pair of summer internships taught him the tricks of the trade.

Wise spent the summer after his first year of law school interning for Thomas F. Londrigan, a partner in the law firm of Londrigan, Potter & Randle, P.C. in Springfield, where he had the opportunity to watch experienced lawyers argue a variety of civil matters in the courtroom.

When he returned to Chicago for his second year of law school, one of his professors ignited a passion for criminal defense law

within him. The following summer, he interned for Michael B. Metnick, a well-known criminal defense lawyer in Springfield.

Londrigan and Metnick, as well as a criminal defense "boot camp" he attended in Georgia, taught him invaluable skills about preparation and persuasion.

"It's all about preparation and that leads to an ability to persuade," he says. "The real key is being able to understand the beauty, art and science of persuasion, which you really aren't taught in law school."

By the time he returned to John Marshall for his final year of law school, there was no question about it: he was going to practice criminal defense.

After earning his law degree in 1984, Wise returned to Springfield to take his first-full time legal job with Metnick's firm.

His first trial was defending a man accused of being an accomplice to a robbery. He managed to get a not-guilty verdict for his client and learn a valuable lesson in the process.

"If anyone knows Mike Metnick, they know he can get pretty excited in the courtroom, and I emulated that style," Wise says. "After that trial, Roger [a courthouse bailiff, who doubled as one of his mentors] came up to me and said, 'That's not you.' It's the greatest advice any lawyer that tries cases could ever get. The No. 1 rule is to be yourself."

Wise took Roger's advice to heart and integrated his own style into what he had learned from his mentors. It's a style that many of his colleagues say has served him well over the years.

"He is a brilliant cross examiner. He's unforgiving," says Taseff. "Peter is a magnificent questioner who utilizes the skills of cross examination as well as any lawyer I've ever seen. He is just phenomenal. His closing arguments are always very powerful and full of strong analogies."

Bill Clutter, a private investigator in Springfield, agrees. He met Wise while was studying in the Illinois Supreme Court library and got to know him more at Metnick's firm, where he worked as a staff investigator.

"We worked together for 14 years. Peter is a great attorney," Clutter says. "He's a guy who really gets focused when he's working on a case. He sorts through the minutia of details, which is really necessary in any litigation, and is well prepared for trial, which is part of the recipe of his success."

Wise is a big believer in preparation, even when it comes to his personal life. When he bid and won a guest conductor spot with the Illinois Symphony a few years ago, he prepared by seeking advice from a number of local musicians.

"It was like trying a case. I was not going to go into unprepared," says Wise, who plays clarinet in a local symphony, competes in triatlons, and races sailboats in his free time. "I worked at it. I prepped for it, and it worked out pretty well."

Stepping Out on His Own

In 1997, after more than a decade at Metnick's firm, Wise decided to start his own firm with Gates and fellow Springfield attorney Frederick J. Schlosser.

Wise handles the criminal cases, Gates does commercial litigation, and Schlosser focuses on personal injury matters. Since they started their firm, the trio has added three more attorneys to the mix to expand their practices and deal with administrative, employment, labor and other general matters.

Wise's practices within a 100-mile radius of Springfield, but in recent years, he's had a lot of luck in Decatur.

He represented a man who falsely confessed to the first-degree murder of his infant son in a so-called shaken baby case. Wise brought in experts to testify about false confessions and debunk the shaken baby syndrome, which he says led the jury to acquit his client.

A different Decatur jury acquitted another one of Wise's clients on first-degree murder. He was able to successfully convince the jury that when his client strangled his ex-wife, it was a reckless act rather than an intentional one.

"It seemed like a pretty straight-forward murder case," Clutter says, adding that he was impressed with Wise's work defending the man who strangled his ex. "It was incredible. The victim's own mother testified in his defense."

Clutter, who serves as the director of investigations for the Downstate Illinois Innocence Project at the University of Illinois Springfield, says he hopes Wise's good luck in Decatur will carry over to a case he is handling pro-bono for the group.

Five years ago, Wise started working with the Innocence Project on a motion seeking further testing of a bloody fingerprint found on a Decatur bridge, which is near the area the dismembered body of Karyn Slover was found. The project represents Slover's ex-husband, Michael, and his parents, all of whom were charged and convicted with her 1996 murder.

"He also made the larger commitment to entering his appearance to join in the post conviction petition motion, which is the gorilla of the case," Clutter says. "These types of cases are marathons. It's one thing to take on a pro bono case at the trial level, which are like 100-yard dashes compared to a post conviction trial. He is committed." ■